

WOMEN IN CROSS CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE: STUDYING THE DIASPORIC TRAUMAS OF WOMEN IN THE NOVEL 'NAMESAKE'

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Abstract: Human beings always inherently develop an attachment with the land they dwell in. There is a binding of the two with the help of an unseen coherence. But this sense of bonding disappears or rather gives way to numerous traumatized situations the moment an individual moves away from his native place to a strange land. The individual gets engulfed with loneliness coupled with a situation of crisis of being a stranger which makes the self, navigate between the cultural values of the homeland and the adopted home. This oscillation between the two renders one disturbed state of mind because an individual is not able to do away with his or her indigenous customs or rituals along with the cultural tenets and at the same time not able to embrace the so called 'new' proceedings. This particular traumatic sense is clearly depicted in the famous novel *Namesake* by one of the notable diasporic writers, Jhumpa Lahiri. Digging deep into the numerous problems of the immigrants, she goes on to elaborating the strained life of the female characters who are caught between inveterate and the alien. Ashima, the central female character becomes the representative of how an individual gets stuck in a strange land which leads to uncountable difficulties thereby reiterating alienation. This paper is an attempt to make an evaluative study of the diasporic forbearance of the female characters in the novel with special reference to Ashima. The hypothesis it argues is that an individual gets entangled in the web of alienation and hardships in a foreign land. Thus, the paper touches upon various aspects in relation to diaspora like displacement, indigenous identity and desire to dwell in native land and so on.

Keywords: Culture, Crisis, Identity, Indigenous, Land.

Introduction: The very concept of 'diaspora' has become one of the key words of transnational literature in the late twentieth century although it has its roots in the classical period. Man is known to long for better livelihood. An individual always hankers after a well-led life which in a way facilitates migration because the displacement of people from one place to another can be for numerous reasons like economic facilities, immigration , migration etc. In the general understanding, diaspora simply denotes the movement of human beings being their native land to a foreign land.

In the words of Briziel and Mannur, diaspora implies "dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and relocation in one or more nation-states, territories, or countries" (Theorizing Diaspora, p-1). In today's world, words like 'boundary' and 'fixed' have slowly started to lose their meaning or rather getting replaced with terms like 'fluidity' and 'openness'. Everything is getting mingled with one another leading to the wholeness of the modern world thereby bringing to the forefront critical terms like hybridization of identities. But when we talk about migration as a movement, there emerges certain problems because of cultural as well as linguistic differences of two different groups. Jhumpa Lahiri was herself a second generation migrant and her various novels deal with the predicament of identities of the central characters along with the cross-cultural traumas which an individual has to go through in a foreign land. *Namesake* is also no different. It chronicles the life of Ganguli family who moved from Calcutta to the United States and the struggle thereafter which even forced Ashima, the central lady character think of not raising her child in a place "where she is related to no one"(*Namesake*, 7).

Research Methodology:

1. The paper uses the concept of diaspora as a discrete form of art having a distinctive form, like painting or music more than the culmination of certain characteristics which are the specific denominators. This particular concept helps unravel the darker side of immigrant experiences of the characters in the novel.
2. Another method which the paper follows is a) perspective-based analysis in relation to diaspora and b) interpretations at different depths of meaning creating an ambience where the traumatized self of Ashima gets vividly reflected.

3. The paper also follows the method of extensive study of the ordeals of the expatriates involving numerous hardships in the form of cross-cultural, linguistics and also psycho-social where the characters make strenuous efforts in order to come to terms with the host nation thereby filling the otherwise unseen void. "The immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world" (Dubey,22).

Findings and Results:

1. The sense of being a stranger in a foreign land coupled with loneliness and alienation is one of the worth mentioning findings of the research. Throughout her pregnancy, which has been difficult, Ashima is afraid about raising child in "a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where she seems so tentative and spare" (Namesake,6). Her son, Gogol, will feel at home in the United States in a way that she never does.
2. The varied mindset of two different generations- first and the second is an important finding of the research. The first generation, which leaves their own land of Calcutta in search of better prospects of living is seen to be struggling with the issue of assimilation whereas, the second generation, which is born in the foreign land of America is seen to be having no reluctance in adhering to the alien culture and tradition. During Thanksgiving, when Sonia and Gogol did not come, Ashima could very well make out their need for independence is contrary to the need she felt at their age to be near her family.
3. The contradictory marital depictions of the Bengali couple with particular mention of Ashima Bhaduri is another notable finding of the research. While her husband Ashoke is seen to be pretty much at ease with the American way of living and is seen to be trying hard to be a part of the so called 'American Dream', Ashima, on the other hand, provided a grim picture. Seen as discomfited on the foreign soil, Ashima tries her level best to get used to her 'adopted' home. She feels stifled and in a way develops an antagonistic openness towards the frank American culture.
4. Distinction of cultures is another worth mentioning finding of the research. The tension between the way things in the United States and the way things are India is apparent in the character of Mrs. Jones, the elderly secretary Ashoke shares with other members of his department at the university. She lives alone and sees her children and grandchildren rarely; this is "a life that Ashoke's mother would find humiliating" (Namesake,27). Again this particular aspect is seen in the wedding between Moushumi and Gogol. Their parents plan the entire thing, inviting people neither of them has met and engaging in rituals neither of them understands in the "watered-down Hindu ceremony". They don't have the type of intimate, personal wedding their American friends would have planned.

Interpretation and Discussion: When there is movement of people from one place to another, it is generally seen that, at the very outset there is always struggle for getting mingled. An individual is not able to shed off his or her native ways of living and at the same time appears incapable of embracing the new customs wholeheartedly. Thus, it becomes vividly evident that this so called uncertain 'space' created is undoubtedly a hybrid one. The words by Homi Bhabha reiterate the same, it can be observed that "in the emergence of the interstices- the overlap and displacement of domains of difference- that the inter-subjective and collective experiences of nation-ness, community interest, or cultural values are negotiated" (Bhabha, 2). "The scattering leads to a splitting in the sense of home. A fundamental ambivalence is embedded in the term diaspora: a dual ontology in which the diasporic subject is seen to look in two directions-towards a historical cultural identity on one hand, and the society of relocation on the other" (Ashcroft, 425).

Ashima, throughout her pregnancy is afraid about raising a child in "a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where she seems so tentative and spare" (Namesake,6). The various difficulties faced by Indian women after moving to a different place especially by women becomes highly relevant in this context. The cultural otherness which our women face in an alien land coupled with trans-nations hardships render them a space where they get entangled amidst the 'newness'. This particular aspect is clearly visible in Ashima. The plot can very well be said to be the cross-cultural one which chronicles the in-between state of the Ganguli family. The character of Ashima can be read to be one of those conventional Indian women who shows reluctance when it comes to changing oneself and getting acquainted with the foreign culture. Her ways of passing leisure time by reading Bengali poems, stories and articles along with her preoccupied thoughts of her old home provide ample testimony to the argument.

Pregnancy was a hard time for Ashima. It was a time where she was deprived of her own family members. Being a stranger, she was utter in a state of despair during this troublesome period. It was seen that there was

no other Indian woman at the hospital which further heightened her sense of loneliness thereby aggravating the problem of loneliness. Nostalgia engulfs her and her mind always remained preoccupied with the family members of her own land. After Gogol's birth she says to Ashoke, "I am saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back" (Namesake, 33). Her motherly instincts gets portrayed with her determination to give birth to the child in a foreign land just for the sake of the child. One of the notable aspects of her inclinations is that she wants her grandmother in India to name the newborn baby which yet again shows that she was still 'Indian' in her heart and mind although she was physically an 'American'. Ashima feels alienated in the suburbs; this alienation of being a foreigner is compared to " a sort of lifelong pregnancy- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts... something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect" (Namesake, 27).

Ashima suffers from deprivation of sleep with her baby alone at home and even whenever she visits the supermarket, she sees no friendly faces but strangers. She often is seen to be recalling her grandmother, who, like her, was not able to give up the very sense of belonging to the native place. She is always reminded of the words of her elders who told her "not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family" (Namesake, p. 37). She feels alienated and alone after showering before last Christmas Party she hosts at the house on Pemberton Road. After the death of her husband, she is "shattered into pieces and she feels lonely, suddenly, horribly, permanently alone and briefly, turned away from the mirror, she sobs for her husband" (Namesake, 278) . Impatience creeps in coupled with indifference which further deteriorated her mindset to lead the coming days. She does not feel motivated to stay in Calcutta with the family she left over thirty years ago, nor does she feel excited about being in the United States with her children and her potential grandchildren. She just feels exhausted and overwhelmed without her husband.

Other characters like Moushumi also suffered from this very sense of alienation. She described to Gogol how she rejected all Indian suitors with whom her parents tried to set her up. She made up her mind that there would be none which in a way brought in the feeling of wonder that it is her fear of getting married to someone she was never in love with made her reject all the suitors. She went to Paris so that she could reinvent herself without the confusion of where she fit in. she led a bohemian life there till she met an American, Graham and returned with him to New York to finally get married.

Conclusion: Lahiri, through her artistic genius creates a lively traumatic picture by depicting the hidden traumas of all Indian women who move away to other places with Ashima as a symbol. An otherwise responsible wife, mother and grand-daughter, she always longed for the 'Indian-ness' in the foreign land. The Indian diaspora can probably be traced to ancient times when Buddhist monks travelled to the remote corners of Asia. However, nineteenth and twentieth centuries are considered to be the periods of the Indian diaspora, when Indians in large numbers went to industrially advanced countries in search of jobs. This migration of Indians was and is a strictly personal choice and the Indians living in a host country continue to live in a sandwich world, refusing to give up their cultural roots, as they still hope for assimilation and acculturation. In the novel Lahiri successfully captured feelings of lonely, alienated, emotionally dried-up individuals like Ashima Ganguli dragging their feet in two different geographical territories and tries to locate them- both psychologically and physically, in a fast changing world, where all barriers – racial, cultural, national appear crumbling, giving new definition to the concept of "home" and "identity".

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